

CHAPTER ONE

“I hate you!” I slammed the door into the jamb with a boom, and it shivered the walls down the hall and into the living room and dining room. The china in the cabinet tinkled against glass shelves. The grandfather clock in the entry groaned a gong, even though it was still ten minutes before the hour.

In my bedroom, the knickknacks on the bookshelf tottered and rattled. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the trophy on the top shelf wobble and teeter side to side, like a drunk staggering along a line. I stretched out my arm, but too late. It somersaulted to the floor. The golden, pony-tailed soccer girl, her leg outstretched with ball balanced against her arch, landed upside-down on the floor. Her head and foot snapped off, and the rest of her body broke free from the trophy’s pedestal.

“Ouch!” I said, rubbing the back of my head, as if the injury had been to me and not to the figurine that was supposed to represent me.

I picked up the pieces. The “MVP” plaque had popped off the fake-marble base. “Most Vocal Person,” I said, changing the real meaning of the abbreviation. “Why can’t I just keep my big mouth shut?” I dumped the mess onto my desk.

I raked my fingers through my hair — long, like the soccer girl’s, but not straight and golden like hers. Mine was as dark as night, and it bumped its way down my back in waves that could turn into ringlets if the humidity was high enough.

My belt loops scraped against the door as I slid down and sat on the floor. A human doorstop. I half expected my mother to storm into my room for another showdown. She wouldn’t get in here now even if she *did* try to bust in . . . or come softly knocking in a few minutes, calling my name.

Awakening

It hadn't gone at all like I thought it would. I was so happy when I walked through the front door. It's not every day that someone like Tabby Long invites you to go with her family to their mountain cabin. Cabin, nothing. It's a two-story, four-bedroom, three-bath palace with a hot tub on the deck and two snowmobiles perched on a trailer in the three-car garage.

"Tonight? They're going up tonight?" Mom asked. She slid her chair back slightly from the kitchen table and turned her book over to hold her place.

Although it was upside-down, I could pick out one of the words in the title: *Exodus*. That seemed right. It was an exodus from this house that I had planned.

"Actually, before dinner," I said. "Since we don't have school on Holy Thursday or Good Friday, Mr. Long wants to leave early to beat the Easter crowd. This is the last weekend the slopes will be open. And if we get up there by dinner, he can night-ski under the lights."

Mom glanced up at me. She knew all about Mr. Long's eye disease. Something scary-sounding thing called uveitis. The white part of his eyes looked horribly bloodshot most of the time, and a ring of cloudiness circled the irises. Tabby said that he could go blind.

"He can't ski during the day anymore," I said. "The sunlight reflecting off the snow hurts his eyes. This might be the last time he can see well enough to ski at all."

She nodded her head. "I know." She looked squarely at me. "They don't think his eyes are going to get better."

If that was true, then surely she'd let me go. "Tabby says that sometimes the pain is so bad, he can't go to work. Please, Mom? I don't know when they might be going to the cabin again — if ever."

"But you've only been back to school since Monday."

"I feel fine." I swallowed hard without flinching, as proof that the strep throat that had kept me home for a whole week was completely gone. So what if it still hurt a tiny bit? She didn't need to know that.

"It's not that," Mom said. "Your school work. You've got a lot to make up." Her raised eyebrow challenged me to deny it.

“I’m a fast reader, and I get good grades.” Well, usually. “I’ll bring it with me. I’ll work on it every day.” Yeah, right.

Mom stood up and paused for a moment, her eyes on the table. I could tell she was considering it. “And when would you be back?” Her head cocked toward me.

I silently drew in a big breath. This was it. “Sunday morning. I’d be back in time for the last Easter Mass, I’m sure,” I quickly added.

Mom nodded, still thinking, and kneaded her forehead with her fingertips. She knew how important this was for me. Tabby might have been the new girl at school last September, but now there was no one in the whole eighth grade more popular. Some of the other girls had spent weekends at her cabin this winter. And now, with just two months left of school, she had finally asked me.

Mom slipped back into her chair and placed her palms on the table. “Ronni, this is the Easter Triduum. Why would you want to be gone during the holiest time of year?” She spread her fingers and raised them slightly to punctuate her question.

She wanted to know *why*? Wasn’t she *ever* my age? Didn’t she remember what it was like to have fun?

“But I’ll be back in time for Easter Mass.” Even if I didn’t want to be. “Mr. Long will be sure to get me back whenever you say.” That’s it, suck up. “He’s always on time. I think he got that from being in the army for so long.”

“And the Mass of the Last Supper tomorrow? Did you forget you were supposed to serve?” I had. Why did I sign up to do that? Being an altar server when I started two years ago in sixth grade was cool. But now . . . I was going to quit at the end of the school year. I was still serving only because Mom wanted me to.

“And you’d miss Stations of the Cross on Good Friday,” she said. “What will you be doing instead?”

Just about anything else, I wanted to say. “I don’t know . . . we —”

“He died for *you*, you know.”

Here we go again, I thought. “Well, I didn’t ask him to!”

Mom opened her mouth, but I didn’t let her get a word out.

Awakening

“Dad would have let me go.” That was a low blow, for two reasons. One, because Dad wasn’t a Catholic. And two, because it hadn’t even been a year since Dad and Steven had died. I started to say something else, then promptly shut my trap. Talking about Dad and Steven was like picking at a scab. I didn’t feel like adding a scar today.

Mom shut her eyes and pinched her lips together in a thin line. She thought she could dam up the pain that way. She was pretty good at it. She opened her eyes and looked at me straight on, but she didn’t rise to the bait. She didn’t say anything about what Dad would have done. We both knew that that didn’t matter. Not now.

“So you don’t understand why the Lord suffered and died for you? For us?”

“No,” I said honestly.

Why would anybody die for somebody they didn’t know? I mean, I got the whole bit about salvation. Forgiveness of sin, getting to heaven. It was the sacrifice part that didn’t make sense to me. Couldn’t that have happened any other way? I guess I had a bit of Doubting Thomas in me. I believed in Jesus, I really did. I just never understood why he had to *die*. I always wondered why no one really tried to stop it. I would have. His death seemed so unfair. I just didn’t get it. Nothing was worth dying for.

“And you think you’re going to learn why our Savior died for you while you’re at Tabby’s? I don’t think so. Pay attention during the next few days, and maybe you’ll get it.”

She stood up, the chair legs scraping harshly against the wooden floor, and she huffed into the living room. I knew exactly what she was doing. She’d settle into the rocker, and either pick up her knitting or grab her rosary from the end table, praying to the Blessed Mother to give her strength. Or to ask her Son to do something to save my soul.

One time she had entwined her first two fingers together and held them up to me. “Mary and I are like this,” she had said. She had grown up without a mom, so I could understand her turning to Jesus’ mother for comfort and help. I knew what it was like to have a parent leave you, dying for no good reason.

I had to give it one more chance, but I couldn't think of a convincing argument. I followed her into the living room. "Please?"

No answer. I stamped my foot. "You never let me do anything!" A lie, and still no answer. "You are so mean!" And with that, I stomped off to my room.

As I sat on my bedroom floor, tears pooled behind my lower eyelids; mini waterfalls tumbled down my cheeks. My throat felt as if I were wearing a too-tight turtleneck. The glands under my jawbone seemed swollen and achy. The backs of my hands itched. My eczema became irritated when my nerves got out of whack. I scratched at the scaly patches until they almost bled. Ugly hands. I hated them.

"Ronni!"

At first, I wasn't sure I heard my name being called, but a tapping on my bedroom window confirmed that I wasn't hallucinating.

"Ronni!"

Ohmigosh! I'd forgotten I'd left Tabby standing on the front porch while I went inside to talk to Mom. I hauled myself off the floor and leaned over my desk to slide the window open.

She stood on the other side, the sun highlighting the paler streaks in her blonde hair. With no screen between us, she propped her elbows on the windowsill and rested her chin in her palms. "I guess you're not coming."

"You heard?"

The dimples in her cheeks showed themselves. "It was hard not to. It sounded like a bomb went off in there."

I plopped into the desk chair. "Sorry."

"Why don't you come anyway?" Her eyelids closed slightly as she leaned in a bit. "Just grab your stuff and climb out the window," she whispered. "Look what I brought."

She dug into the pocket of her fleece jacket. Blue, of course. Tabby always wore blue because she said it brought out the color of her eyes. Only her clothes weren't just "blue," to hear Tabby describe them. Her pajamas were "robin's egg," her swimsuit "azure," her favorite blouse "aquamarine," and her velvet skirt "cobalt." Lucky for

Awakening

her our school uniforms were blue. Or should I say “navy”? I don’t know what she would have done if she’d had to wear Sacred Heart School’s fire-engine red.

“Here,” she said, pulling from her pocket a DVD in a clear plastic case: *The Wizard of Oz*. “We can watch it together at the cabin.” For our big assignment in religion class, we had to pick a classic movie from Mr. Josephson’s list and analyze the religious themes in it. A month ago I’d picked my all-time favorite oldie-but-goodie, and Tabby picked the same one.

Mr. Josephson had given us permission to team up and work on our paper together. That’s how we started to be friends.

“Just come,” she said again.

For a moment I was tempted. We’d probably be up at the cabin before Mom even called me to set the table for dinner.

“I can’t. I’m supposed to serve at Mass tomorrow and . . .”

Tabby grunted. Loudly. “Doesn’t all this church-goin’ ever get to you?” She folded her arms across the sill and stared at me. Tabby’s family wasn’t Catholic. They weren’t anything, as far as I could tell. She said her folks sent her to St. Augustine’s for the discipline and the academics. It sure wasn’t to learn the faith, even though she was required to take Mr. Josephson’s religion classes.

I glued my eyes to the desk and rolled a pencil back and forth under my palm. When I realized my scaly hands were exposed to Tabby’s full view, I quickly slipped them behind my back and deliberately didn’t look at her. My teachers and my friends might have known about my eczema. That didn’t mean they liked looking at it. I certainly didn’t.

I never let people see my hands, if I could help it. The eczema along my cuticles caused my nails to thicken and grow out yellowed and bumpy. I’d tuck my hands between my knees when I sat, or cross my arms and fold my hands under my biceps. I loved winter when I could pull long sleeves down as far as they’d go — to my fingertips, if I was lucky.

“I’m sorry,” I finally said, my eyes still on my desk. “I really want to go to the cabin. Maybe you could ask me again some other time —”

“Hi, Mark!” Tabby’s voice came from far away. I looked up. She had left the window and was walking past the neighbor’s open garage where Mark was working on his car. She wouldn’t ask me again. There wouldn’t be another time for me.

CHAPTER TWO

Mark pulled his head of dark curls out from under the hood of a Mustang that was as old as my mom. “Hey, Tab,” he called back to her, his face spreading into a big grin. I ducked off to the side of the window in case he looked my way. Yeah, right. I wished.

Mark had been my big brother Steven’s best friend. They’d been in the same classes and on the same baseball team forever. They’d even picked the same Confirmation name — John. Mark was supposed to be in the car with Dad and Steven that night last summer. It was the guys’ final game of the season before they started high school, and Mark had planned to ride home with Dad and Steven, but his folks showed up during the last inning. Lucky for Mark.

“I’m so sorry, Ronni,” Mark had said after the cops left that awful night. He let me sob against his shoulder, and he cried, too. Then he prayed with me. I never would have thought to do that. How could God have let this happen to Dad and Steven?

Mark had always been like another big brother to me, but since that night, I felt differently about him. Closer. I didn’t care that my mom said she wouldn’t be surprised if he became a priest one day. I began making other plans for him. Plans I could never act on, though. Whenever he was near, I started sweating buckets, and it seemed like I was always saying something stupid or staring at him when he wasn’t looking.

At the sound of more voices, I remembered where I was and peeked out the window. Mr. Simon from across the street stood in Mark’s garage with his hands on his hips, examining the engine of the old Mustang. Mr. Simon had worked in an auto-repair shop before he moved his family here from Jamaica, and whenever he had time after work, he’d come over and help with the car. With months

Awakening

to go before Mark got his license, they were sure to get that thing up and running in time for him to drive it. And to take me to homecoming in the fall. Well, a girl could dream, couldn't she?

The little Simon boys, Alex and R.J., kicked a soccer ball from Mark's yard to mine. I babysat them every Saturday when their folks went out on their "date night." Funny, but I was always available.

"Hi, Ronni," the boys yelled. Uh-oh. Busted. "Come play soccer with us!" Their favorite activity when I watched them.

Mr. Simon glanced up, and Mark looked my way and waved. "Hey, peanut!" he called.

Peanut. Not the first time I had heard that. Although I was the fastest runner on my soccer team, I was also the smallest, and the opposing players often used to taunt me about my size. That is, until I dribbled past them and drove the ball into the net. When others called me "shrimp" or "shorty," they did it in meanness, but Mark's nickname for me was always said with a smile.

My face flushed, and I quickly waved back and stepped away from the window, hoping they couldn't see my blush from that distance.

With my window directly across from Mark's garage, I had a great view of him whenever he was out working on the car, which made it hard to get homework done sometimes. But the last month I'd kept the curtain closed most of the time, ever since the evening I'd taken a bath and walked into my fully lit room wrapped in a towel. I'd forgotten I'd left the shade up. The towel slipped off right as I walked past the window. I could hear music coming from the Mustang and knew Mark was working on it. I hit the floor immediately. Had he seen me? Was I going to ruin him for the priesthood? Probably just the opposite, I figured. After getting an eyeful of me, he'd go straight to the minor seminary instead of entering his sophomore year of high school in September.

I couldn't be sure what he'd glimpsed, if anything, but he had avoided my eyes every time I'd seen him after that, which could have meant nothing — or everything. It didn't matter because, since then, I'd been too embarrassed to talk to him.

I took one more peek out the window, but he was gone. What did catch my eye, though, was the “For Sale” sign in our front yard. A lump formed in my throat. Dad’s life insurance wouldn’t be enough to let us hang on to the house for too much longer. The savings account got tapped out when he opened his own law firm. That included our college funds, which he was sure he would be able to replenish in no time. So much for my dreams of med school.

My eyes burned, and through the gathering tears, I examined the pieces of the fractured trophy on my desk. I couldn’t mend the broken chunks of the plastic girl. And I’d never get the chance to try to heal humans either, I realized. I swept the pile into the trash can.

I stepped up to my full-length mirror and examined my eyes more intently. Red-rimmed lids circled the bloodshot whites. I wondered if Mr. Long’s eye disease was contagious. Whenever I blinked, my head pounded. That’s what I got for crying. What I needed was a shower.

I noiselessly swung open my door and tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom. As I closed the bathroom door, I heard the doorbell ring. For a minute I thought it might be Tabby. But when Mom didn’t call to me, I knew that Tabby was gone. Despondently, I started the shower, peeled off my school uniform pants and oxford shirt, and left the clothes piled on the floor with my socks and underwear. The hot water felt wonderful, but just the effort of washing my hair tired out my arms. What was wrong with me? I shut off the water and reached for a towel. Nothing. I slid the shower curtain open, my skin goose-pimpling as the cooler air outside the shower hit me. Where were the towels? The racks were bare.

Of course. This was Wednesday. Mom cleaned the bathroom and washed the towels on Wednesdays. Why hadn’t she hung up fresh ones? The linen closet was out in the hall. I’d drip all the way there. And it would be just my luck that Mark would be standing in the living room talking to my mom and looking straight down the hall at me.

I decided to dry off with my clothes, but stupid me had left the corner of the shower curtain outside the tub, and my uniform was sopping wet.

Awakening

I wrung out my hair and stood on the cold tile floor, a trickle of water snaking down my back. Mom had even taken the bath mat. In the cabinet under the sink, there was nothing to use to dry off. I searched the drawers, and in the bottom one, I pulled out a big white rectangle. It was a thin cotton towel that we used for drying dishes or to put over delicate fabrics when Mom ironed. She called it a “tea towel.” It would have to do.

I wrapped the cloth around my hair and tucked in the ends. By then, my body was almost dry, but I didn’t want to streak down the hall naked to my room. Mom’s old nightgown was shoved in the back of the drawer. She wore it as a smock when she colored her hair. I snagged it and slipped it over my head. The plain, beige cotton fabric was worn, but soft and cozy. It reached nearly to my ankles and had long sleeves, which I cuffed, and a simple V-neck opening.

The door creaked slightly as I pulled it open. I paused to listen. The television was on in the family room. No, wait, it wasn’t the TV. Mom was talking with someone. Maggie. Yuck! That freak with her skimpy clothes and multiple piercings was always sniffing around Mark — like she used to do with Steven. It didn’t matter that he was a year younger than she was — he was still a guy, and when it came to Maggie, any and *every* guy would do.

It was just my luck that when Mom started mentoring at the high school, Maggie got assigned to her. Somehow Mom had convinced Maggie to come to youth group at church a few times. She probably went for the same reason I did: Mark. Her appearance there always caused quite a stir, especially with the guys. But the last time I saw her, there wasn’t an inch of midriff showing on Maggie. A long-sleeved shirt covered the “Bad Girl” tattoo on her bicep, and the number of earrings in each ear was down to two. But the eyelids were still smoky and the lips really red.

Mom must have quoted First Corinthians to her as she always did to me, echoing St. Paul’s words that our bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit. How did I get so lucky that I had not only a retired college Scripture professor for a religion teacher, but also a mother

who scolded me with Bible verses? Mom was always throwing St. Paul's words at me and then cautioning me to not wear skimpy tank tops, short shorts, or low-rise jeans. So what if Maggie *had* been listening to her? I still didn't like that girl.

I sneaked back to my room, sat down at the desk, and fished a handful of sunflower seeds out of a bag in the drawer. I scattered them on the outside window ledge and slid the glass closed. It wasn't long before a cream-colored pigeon swooped to a landing and began pecking at the seeds. I'd been feeding him for weeks, and we were slowly becoming friends. I was betting that soon I'd be able to reach out, and he'd let me hold him in my hand.

While he cracked open seed after seed, I propped my feet on my desk and went to work taking the polish off my toenails. That old purple shade just wasn't going to work with the new shoes I planned to wear to Easter Mass — red leather slides with two-inch stacked wooden heels that made me look a little taller and feel much older.

I moved from left to right, rubbing a cotton ball soaked in polish-remover across the nails, beginning with my pinky toe on my left foot. By the time I reached my other little toe, the cotton ball was dry and the bottle of polish-remover empty. I didn't care. I could have picked off the remaining polish, but the throbbing in my temples made me lose all interest. That nail was tiny, and nobody would see the fleck of purple on it when it was tucked behind the strap of the red shoes.

I folded my arms on my desk and rested my head on them so I could look at the picture of Dad and Steven in a frame just inches from my face. Thoughts of them filled my mind, and as always happened when I remembered the night of the accident, anger seeped in. I wasn't with them that night. If I had been, maybe I could have saved them. But I wasn't, and they died for nothing.

In my head I recreated what must have happened and played out the scene: on their way home from the baseball game, Dad and Steven pull over to help a guy who had crashed into the guard rail on the winding road leading up to our neighborhood. They get the old guy

Awakening

out of his car and start to push it out of the way when another car whips around the curve. The driver doesn't see them until it is too late. My dad and brother go flying.

I see the old guy off to the side of the road. Drunk. Not a scratch on him. No license. Not even in the country legally. No job. Borrowed car. A nobody.

I shook my head to make the images go away. I sat up and rubbed at the pain in my forehead. A nap. That's what I needed. I hadn't dried my hair, and I was still in Mom's old nightgown, but I didn't care. I slipped into bed and pulled the covers up under my chin. Then the shaking started. I was cold on the inside and burning on the outside. I could barely squeeze a drop of saliva down my throat, and my body hurt everywhere — right down to my eyelashes.

I wanted everything that I had no energy to get: water, Tylenol, socks, a hot-water bottle . . . and, I hated to admit it, my mom. My eyelids were so hard to open, they might as well have been garage doors. And when I finally cracked them a bit, the door to my bedroom seemed miles away. I tried to call for my mother, but the effort of attempting to push air through my vocal cords made my throat feel like the inside of a furnace.

Hot tears rolled from the outside corners of my eyes and down into my ears. I couldn't move, I couldn't talk, and I could barely breathe. One thought kept rolling through my mind: I was dying. I was dying.

CHAPTER THREE

It was like being in one of those dreams where you know you're dreaming, but you don't care. Quiet, calm, and peace bound me tightly. The sky looked hazy and out-of-focus, as if it were dusted with powdered sugar. Then the center rippled, and through a rift, a white dove emerged, wings flapping. It flew closer and closer, and I could feel soft waves of cool air wash over my face with each beat of a wing. It settled on my shoulder but continued to flutter its feathers, softly caressing my cheek.

While I could see all this, I couldn't physically open my eyes; they felt sewn shut. Weighted down by metal. Gradually, I realized that it wasn't a dove's wing grazing my face, but fingers. Several scents blended together. Fish. Herbs. Earth. Sweat. Man.

Slowly, my hearing engaged, and the sound of music reached my ears. Flutes playing somewhere outside. Mournful notes hovered around my head.

A murmur of voices floated to me, punctuated by my mother's sobbing, "Seraphina!" That was weird. Why was she using my middle name?

"She will be fine," a woman's voice said.

"You must have faith," added a man.

My brain felt clogged with cotton, but from its depths, I registered that they weren't speaking English. Yet I understood them completely.

The fingers ceased stroking my cheek, and a warm hand rested lightly along my jaw line.

"*Talitha koum*," a man said. "Little girl, I say to you, arise!"

Air filled my lungs, and my eyelids flew open. A bearded man sat perched on the edge of my bed, his hip touching my thigh, his left hand gripping mine, his right hand still resting against my face.

Awakening

Suddenly, I was sitting upright. He hadn't lifted me, and I had made no effort to get in that position myself, but there I was, sitting up and feeling fine. Off to my left, I heard my mother stifle a gasp. Then her voice filled the room, loud and clear. "Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name!"

The words seemed familiar to me. Weren't they the opening line of a psalm? In my religion class, Mr. Josephson made each of us memorize and recite a psalm for our midterm exam. Had one of my classmates picked this one? Is that why I knew it?

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who had heard it. After my mother prayed the first line, everyone else in the room picked up on the recitation. "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases," — my mother choked out a sob — "who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

My gaze never left the man sitting on my bed as I watched him, too, pray the psalm. His complexion was dark; his shoulder-length wavy hair was shiny black. My eyes were interlocked with his as if a tractor beam had me in its grip. How could it be that eyes so dark could have so much light and life in them? He was smiling at me with his whole face as well as his mouth, even though he was praying, and although I'd never seen him before, I was certain I had known him my whole life.

Behind him, the door was open, and the blaze of light spilling into the room illuminated the hair along the top curve of his head in a semicircle of brightness. Then a movement behind him caught my attention. Three men stood at the foot of the bed, their heads bowed, their lips moving in prayer. They reminded me of Hunk, Zeke, and Hickory, the farm hands huddled around Dorothy in her room at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*. But instead of overalls, they wore what looked like bathrobes.

"Hunk" and "Zeke" must have been brothers, they looked so much alike, but the older one was a couple of inches shorter and a bit

scruffier than the other. Not a trace of stubble shadowed the chin of the younger one, still a teenager for sure, and not a bad-looking one at that. A barrel-chested “Hickory” looked up at me with serious eyes, a mane of dark, coarse hair flecked with gray framing his face and blending in with his wiry beard.

I closed my eyes and shook my head to clear it. To try to wake up. And when I opened my eyes again as the psalm ended, I saw silhouetted in the doorway a curly-haired figure whose face I didn’t need to see to recognize: Mark.

The man sitting on my bed squeezed my hand, then let go. “Give her something to eat,” he instructed.

At first I thought the woman who approached my bed was a nun. She wore a black robe, and a veil of charcoal gray framed a beautiful face. A kind face. An older, feminine version of the face of the man sitting on the edge of my bed.

Her hands cradled a wooden bowl filled with dried figs, which she offered to me. I picked one up and held it a moment, remembering my dad. During the holidays, his law firm used to send trays of dried fruit to their clients, and he always saw to it that one was delivered to our family as well. Mom liked the dates best. The apricot and pear halves were Steven’s favorites, but I loved the sweet gritty insides of the figs. We didn’t get a tray last Christmas.

I bit into the fruit, but my throat was so dry, I couldn’t get the morsel down. “Milk,” my mother said, and a cup found its way into my hands.

I swigged down a big gulp and immediately choked, the liquid backing up in my throat and fizzing into my nose. Ick! What kind of milk was this? It wasn’t cold, it wasn’t skim, and it wasn’t from a cow. A bleating goat outside gave away the source.

Gentle laughter washed over me. The man on the edge of my bed, who must have been a doctor, patted my leg once and rose.

“Thank you, thank you,” my mother said as she grasped his hands in hers and brought them to her lips.

She turned to the woman. “Miriam,” she said, her voice cracking.

Awakening

Miriam set down the fig bowl, hugged my mother, and smiling at me, followed the men out of the room. She pulled the door closed behind her, shutting off the opening in which Mark no longer stood.

“Seraphina!” My mother drew me to my feet and snaked her arms around me. “I thought you were . . .” She nearly squeezed the breath out of me, and underneath my cheek, I could feel her chest quivering.

I pulled back slightly and looked, really looked at my mom. Her face was the same, except for the gray circles under her tear-moistened eyes, but her clothing was plain, dark and old-fashioned. Really old-fashioned. A simple floor-length shift of rough, black fabric with a leather rope belt knotted at the side.

My eyes traveled up and down her clothes, then scanned the room. Everything was so strange. A feeling of panic rushed from my gut and escaped my lips in a small, strangled noise.

“Shhh,” Mom whispered. “You are safe. At home. In our sleeping room.”

I closed my eyes, rubbed them, opened them again, and looked at the room in detail. Sparsely furnished. Small. Dark. Another bed across from mine — my mother’s? Dirt floor, stone walls. All in black and white like an old television show. Not my bedroom at all.

I couldn’t get a grip on where I was. *When* I was. *Who* I was. I went to the closed door. The rough metal handle had a shiny spot where thumbs had worn it smooth. I pulled on the thick-planked wood, and it squeaked open on old hinges. The monotone interior of the room yielded to a colorful outdoors. I gasped.

I stood in the entrance, looking out onto a courtyard brilliant with the afternoon sun. My milk provider, recently shorn, I noted, was tethered to a stake, blissfully chewing her cud and twitching her long, floppy ears at pesky flies.

On the ground, a raised, circular layer of square-cut stones with an opening in the center looked as if it could be an in-ground hot tub, but weathered ropes coiled like cobras and scattered wooden buckets told me it was a well of some sort.

Other rooms of the house faced this courtyard. An open set of stairs stretched up to the flat rooftop. Colorful mats, rugs, and lengths of cloth draped the roof's low wall. Laundry day.

A palm tree grew in one corner of the courtyard. The first palm tree I'd ever seen in person. Slender green finger leaves waved at me in the gentle breeze. In the shade of the tree sat a stool surrounded by cloth sacks overflowing with raw wool, some of which I guessed came from the nearby goat. A long stick with a stone attached at the bottom rested against the stool. I had no idea what it was.

I looked over at the goat, which stopped her chewing, cocked her head, and returned my gaze. "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." I stopped at the sound of my voice. The words had formed in my brain in English but tumbled from my mouth in Aramaic. My hand flew to my mouth. I could speak another language! Me, who was still *muy stinko* after taking Spanish for two years, could suddenly speak Aramaic.

CHAPTER FOUR

My mother touched my shoulder, and I turned to face her. “Mom, I’m so confused . . .”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Well, when I was —” When I was what? Sick? Asleep? Dead? By way of explanation, my eyes darted to the bed against the wall.

“Yes?” Mom led me to the edge of the bed where we sat down together on a mattress that rustled of straw. Not quite the down-filled mattress-topper I was used to.

Where should I begin?

“I was living in another place. Another time. You were still my mom. Dad and Steven were gone.” I halted, suddenly hopeful. They weren’t by any chance still alive, were they? Mom’s face sank, and her head bowed. That answered that.

“Things were different. Our house. Our clothes. Everything.”

She cupped my face in her hands. “A dream,” she said. “Your fever was so high. You were saying strange things. I have no doubt your dreams were troubling ones. I was not sure you would live.” Her voice caught in her throat. “I am not sure you did not die.” She pressed her lips to my forehead, then sat back. “Maybe God blessed you with a vision. He blessed me by returning you to me.”

“But it was real. So real. You and I had a fight,” I said. She nodded, a soft smile curling up the corners of her mouth.

“We *did* fight, didn’t we?” I asked.

“A disagreement. Not our first and probably not our last.” She grinned.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“I know. And I hope you understand why you must be here for the Seder meal and not off with Tabitha.”

Awakening

Seder? Didn't she mean Easter? "I know," I answered. But in reality, I didn't know anything.

Mark cleared his throat, delicately announcing his presence.

My mother rose from the bed and gestured to him. "Oh, Mark, come in," she said. I crossed my arms over my chest. What was she thinking? I was in a nightgown, after all, with nothing on underneath! He didn't seem to notice or care. Neither did my mom. He walked slowly toward the bed, and I stood up, arms still locked in an *X* in front of me.

"Are you well?" he asked.

"I am. In fact, I feel better than ever." It was true. I didn't have an ache or pain anywhere, and I felt more rested than I could ever remember.

"Good." He dropped his eyes and fumbled with the edges of his sleeveless cloak, drawing the two halves together over his chest. "Good," he said again, his long, dark lashes brushing his cheeks as he looked at the floor. Wow, was he cute, even though under the open cloak, he was wearing what I would call a dress — a tunic that hit him just below the knees and nicely showed off his calves.

Mom and I exchanged glances. I raised my eyebrows as if to ask, "What's up with him?" She shook her head slightly as if to say, "I don't know."

"Well, Mark, thank you for checking on Seraphina," Mom said.

For checking on me again, I added silently, remembering him standing outside the door a while ago.

"Oh, um, yes." He gestured to a basket he had set on the floor at the entrance to the room. "I'm taking food to Aunt Shayna today."

"Mmmm?" my mother asked

Mark fiddled with the flaps of his cloak and cleared his throat. "You said you wanted me to take something to her."

My mother's hands flew up. "Oh, yes, of course! The raisin cakes! Wait one moment." She hurried from the room, and Mark looked to me.

"While you were sick, Aunt Shayna hurt her foot," he explained.

“Oh.” It was all I could say. Who was Aunt Shayna, anyway?

“She can’t join us tomorrow for the feast, so I am bringing her some things.”

“Oh.” Wow, what a brilliant conversationalist I was becoming. Thankfully, my mother came back into the room and stuffed a wrapped bundle into the basket.

“There,” she said, brushing off her hands as she stood. “Thank you for reminding me, Mark. I had other things on my mind.” She looked pointedly at me.

“Can I go with you?” I asked Mark. He opened his mouth to respond, but my mother jumped in instead.

“Seraphina, you have been quite ill.”

“No, Mother, really, I feel fine. Could I go, please?”

She looked to Mark, who simply shrugged his shoulders.

My mother felt my forehead and pressed her fingers under my jaw to feel my glands. “No fever. No more swelling.” She glanced at Mark.

“She can come with me, if she would like,” he said.

My mother considered it for a moment and surprised me with her answer.

“All right. But you must not tire yourself,” she said with the shake of a finger at me.

“I won’t let her,” Mark interjected.

“And be home for the evening meal,” she said.

I opened my mouth to answer, but Mark jumped in again. “I’ll see to it,” he said.

“Then put on your sandals,” she said to me, motioning to the floor at the end of my bed, “and don’t forget your veil.”

From a table next to the bed, she plucked up a length of white material — the cloth I had worn around my wet hair when I got out of the shower. How could that be? I stood paralyzed as I watched her shake it out. She positioned it on my head and tucked the loose ends in under my hair behind my neck.

“Your sandals,” she said again.

Awakening

I gave up being modest and uncrossed my arms. I fetched the sandals from where she pointed on the floor, then I sat on the edge of the bed. The worn straps of leather were tacked into soles that felt like wood. Upon closer inspection, I noted that they *were* wood, thinly layered. It didn't matter which foot I put into which sandal. They were identical rectangles, no left or right.

What was wrong with me? Mom was there. Mark was there. But *where* were we? If this was my home, why did this place seem so strange?

I knotted a cloth belt around my waist and walked to the door with Mark.

"Seraphina, mantle," Mom said. What was she talking about? I looked around the room. There wasn't a fireplace to be seen.

"Your mantle," she said again and pulled a woven shawl from a peg near the door. A golden zigzag design worked its way through the burgundy fabric which she settled over my shoulders.

"Now, don't be late," she cautioned. "You have chores, and if you are up to going with Mark, you are up to doing them, too. You can start by dumping the pot on your way out."

She motioned to a corner of the room. I walked over to find a large crockery bowl with a rope handle covered by a slab of wood. Next to it was a basket of leaves. I lifted the lid covering the bowl.

"Ick!" The bile backed up into my throat at the smell. It was nearly full. It was our toilet.

Mark and my mother paid no attention to me.

"The city is so crowded, we will walk outside the wall," Mark said. He looked to my mother for confirmation, and she nodded.

"I'll get some water from the cistern," he said to me as he led the way across our courtyard. He drew water from the opening in the ground and poured it into a crockery pitcher.

Carrying the pot with my arm extended as far as it would go, I followed him through the door that opened onto the street. No cars. No lamp posts. No sidewalks. Just people. And animals. Everywhere. Not my neighborhood at all.

Mark wasn't kidding about the crowding. People young and old jammed together as they slowly made their way in one direction or another, mothers desperately trying to keep their little ones close.

"All right, dump it," Mark said, motioning a bit impatiently to the pot I held.

Where? I wanted to ask, but then I noticed the gutter lined with half-pipe shaped stones. I poured out the contents of the pot, trying not to let anything splash up onto my legs. Mark "flushed," sloshing the pitcher of water down the channel, washing everything away. At least away from in front of where we stood.

We set pitcher and pot inside the door to my courtyard and merged with bodies in the street.

Dogs ran along the edges of the crowd while donkeys carried bundles and kids on their backs. And then there was a camel. No, two! They passed right in front of us, and I crouched behind Mark's shoulder in case one of them (the camels, that is) decided to spit.

It smelled like the zoo — only riper. I breathed in and out through my mouth and checked the bottoms of my sandals to make sure I hadn't stepped in anything. They were clean, but I had to watch where I walked. Squishy brown curls and larger mounds of pellets that looked like big black olives dotted the stone roadway.

As he threaded a path through the crowd, Mark grabbed my hand, and my heart skittered in my chest. I only hoped that the rough skin wouldn't gross him out.

"Jerusalem at Passover — is there a more crowded city?" he asked.

Jerusalem! I would have stopped in place, if not for the gentle pull of his hand. My head swiveled back and forth, my eyes soaking in the square-shaped, golden-colored houses stepping their way up the hillside behind us like sugar cubes, one upon another.

The people around us were all dressed in robes, and many of them sported head coverings. Most of the adults had bundles tucked under their arms, as did the older children, and some of the men held birdcages aloft, out of the way of the traffic. My ears were filled with a din of voices talking in various languages, shouting, and laughing.

Awakening

Every so often, the occasional baby's wail or donkey's bray punctuated the air.

I felt as if I were having an out-of-body experience. How could I possibly be here? Was this really my home? The place was strange, but Mom and Mark were familiar. Had I lost my memory while I was sick? What was happening to me?

Something warm oozed between my toes, bringing me back to the moment. Mark waited patiently as I used a stone to scrape a dog's mess from my foot and sandal. After that, I paid better attention to where I stepped.

Ahead of us loomed the city wall constructed of row upon row of cut stone blocks stacked tens of feet tall. Along the very top, gaps as broad as a man's arm span evenly separated sections of stone the same width. They looked like widely spaced teeth running along the entire perimeter. Like the points of a crown.

Mark took my hand again and guided me through a tangle of people funneling themselves through an arched opening in the wall, most of them moving in the opposite direction from us, into the city. Even though we were headed downhill, I felt as if we were salmon swimming upstream. Finally, we emerged through the arch in the wall, leaving the noisy city behind us and entering a calmer, quieter valley.

We turned to the right and followed the road in a clockwise direction around the outside of the wall of the city. I think Mark had forgotten he was holding my hand. I wished he wouldn't remember, but he did, and he let it go and shifted the basket from one hand to the other.

"I heard you saying what it was like when you had the fever. Your dream," he said.

"Yes, but I'm not sure it was really a dream."

He cocked an eyebrow at me.

"I mean, everything here seems so strange to me," I said. "But I remember everything about that other place where I was living and everything about that time."

“It wasn’t Jerusalem?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” I said. “It was Amer—” I snapped my mouth shut. Surely America didn’t exist for these people — yet. I wanted to say it was a country on the other side of the world, but as far as I knew, the world ended for Mark where the sea slipped off the edge of the earth. “I lived in a place far, far away. But when I woke up — I was here! I don’t know how I got here, but, Mark, I think I really *was* living in another time.”

He considered what I said for a few minutes, then asked, “Was I there?”

A blush burned its way across my cheeks, but luckily he kept his eyes to the road. I didn’t want him to think he had been starring in my dreams. Even though he did plenty of that. But it was true. He *was* there.

“What makes you think you would be there?” I asked him.

He looked over at me and raised his shoulders. “Well, I *am* your brother.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, and he walked on a few paces before he realized I wasn’t at his side, and then he stopped.

My brother? No way! *Steven* was my brother, not Mark. I couldn’t have a crush on my brother!

It took a moment for me to wrap my brain around what he had actually said. When I finally did, I sighed with relief as I realized that the Aramaic word he had used for “brother” was *aba*, which could also mean kinsman. Thank goodness! We may have been in the same clan or tribe or something, but at least he wasn’t my *brother* brother.

“You were my neighbor,” I said when I caught up to him.

He chuckled. “Things don’t change much. We’ve been neighbors all our lives.”

So he knew me forever. In this place. Just as I knew him — back home.

“Sera—” He watched the dust puff up around his feet as we walked. “Even if you can’t remember some things, I’m glad you are feeling better.”

Awakening

Physically, yes. But mentally? I wasn't sure. "I'm glad that doctor was there," I said.

"Doctor? Oh, Yeshua. He is quite the healer."

"You know him?" I asked.

Mark looked at me as if to say, "Are you nuts?"

"We both do," he said slowly, confused by my confusion. "And, yes, he healed you."

"Mark, it was more than that. I was . . ." I stopped. "He brought me back."

His eyes glistened with tears. "I know. I've seen it before."

"You have?"

"His work is . . . amazing. I still can't get used to what he can do, even after being with him these many months. Watching him in Bethany . . . and seeing Lazarus . . . and . . ."

I jerked to a halt and latched my hand around Mark's bicep. "Yeshua? Yeshua — Jesus?" I asked.

"Yes —"

It couldn't be. It wasn't possible, was it? "What's the date?" I asked, my heart thundering under my ribs. "It's not 33, is it?"

"Thirty-three what?"

"The year. Is the year 33?"

Mark cocked his head, and an inverted *V* etched itself between his eyebrows. He lifted his hand to touch my forehead, checking for recurring fever, I'm sure.

"I'm fine." I took his hand in mine. "Really, I'm fine. For some reason, I just can't remember the year." He didn't pull his fingers away. Instead, they closed gently on my hand.

"It is the seventeenth year of the Emperor Tiberius."

Oh, great. That helped a lot. Exactly when *was* that? Something about the way Mark said it was vaguely familiar. Wasn't there a bit in the Bible about the reign of the Emperor Tiberius? But where? Old Testament? New? I was not only out of place, I was lost in time, but in a time that was somehow still mine.